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ABSTRACT

The opinions of young urban teenagers about the possible impeachment of President Clinton were studied through assigned compositions. Among the 228 students, all in grades 7 through 9 in Milwaukee (Wisconsin), were 9 European Americans, 15 Hispanic Americans, 6 Hmong, and 198 African Americans. Student compositions showed little knowledge of the facts of the President's situation. They knew that the President had a sexual affair, but knew little else about it. They were strongly empathetic toward the President, although they did express a moral code that was very similar to common beliefs among the U.S. public. Students expressed a belief that the President should be treated as other people are treated. (SLD)

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What Do Urban Middle School Youth Think Should Happen to President Clinton?

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The literature on urban youth argues that they do bad things (drugs, violence, sex) because they lack conscience. Without a moral compass they are insensitive, even unaware of how they are destroying their own lives and burdening society. The proposition that they have substituted street values for those of the general American society is one to which I have contributed in the past. Given this popular perception I decided that young urban teenagers would be the ideal group to react to President Clinton's situation.

The Respondents

The students are all 7th, 8th, and 9th graders attending three middle schools and one high school in Milwaukee. Their teachers had them write compositions answering the question, "Should President Clinton Be Impeached?" The background of the 228 respondents were as follows: 9 European American, 15 Hispanic, 6 Hmong, and 198 African American. There were approximately 56% females and 44% males in the group.

What the Youngsters Wrote

The 228 responses included some as short as one sentence, others as long as two pages. The average number of statements was eight. The 228 respondents made a total of 1,824 statements. Of these, 1,287 statements pertained to the question and were comprehensible. Figure 1 summarizes these statements.

Essence of Statement	Number of Responses	Percent
Nobody's business	399	31
President Clinton did wrong	322	25
Monica to blame	193	15
President doing good job	128	10
President's family hurt	103	8
Enemies out to get him	51	4
Media is the problem	39	3
Forgive him	26	2
Punish him/no mercy	13	1
Don't care	13	1
	1,287	100

Figure 1. Content Analysis of Urban Middle Schools' Compositions Re: President Clinton's Impeachment

Compositions with statements of wrongdoing by the President were likely to also include statements that it is "nobody's business." The number and strength of statements that the President did wrong (322) was more likely to lead to the conclusion that it is still "nobody's business" (399) rather than to some form of punishment (13).

How the respondents feel about impeachment is a significant "no." Assuming two choices there could not be this many "no" responses by chance.

	Male		Female		Total	
Response	No.	%	No.	%	Number	Percent
Yes	24	10	27	12	51	22
No	66	29	84	37	150	66
Resign	2	1	0	0	2	1
Don't Care	3	1	4	2	7	3
Unclear	7	3	11	5	18	8
	102	44	126	56	228	100.0

Figure 2. Urban Middle Schoolers' Answers to "Should President Clinton Be Impeached?"

What Might the Responses Mean?

I had several impressions going through these compositions. First, there was little or no factual information and what there was was likely to be wrong, e.g.,"President Clinton should not be elected again." Whatever the students believe about the case, their compositions make it abundantly clear that they know the President had a sexual affair but are essentially knowledge free regarding the facts of the case. In effect, they have not been reading newspapers or watching television programs; if they have, they have certainly not retained any factual information.

The students are strongly empathetic. They see the President as a person. ("The President is a regular person except he is President.") They then relate to his situation. ("If I was in his position I would lie too." "I would have done the same thing to stay President.") While a few feel he should be punished—just as they would be—most empathize with him. ("If someone asks you, 'Did you cheat on your wife with so and so?', what are you going to say?")

Although this population of respondents are part of active religious communities, fewer than 1 percent of the statements refer to anything that might be construed as religious; for example, concepts such as grace, forgiveness, sin, or God are hardly mentioned. Whatever the degree of church participation among these respondents they do not apply any religious values or criteria in giving their opinions of what should happen.

At the same time, the respondents are highly moralistic. They seem to be quite clear on right and wrong behavior. Almost every composition explains who and what are right and acts perceived as serious wrongs. I consider this the most important finding of the survey. These youth do have a moral code—and it is very similar to the common beliefs in the general American value system, e.g., adultery is wrong; an older man having sex with a young employee is wrong; lying under oath is wrong; hurting one's wife and family is wrong. These mostly

African American young teenagers share the same values as most Americans. If anything, they have an oversupply of moral prescriptions. Their behavior cannot be simplistically written off as amoral. These respondents have a strong, clear sense of what they believe to be right and wrong.

There is also a theme of fairness defined as sameness in many of the compositions. Their definition of fairness is that the president should be punished in the same way as other people. "If Bill Clinton is punished then so should the rest of the people in the world who have an affair. Do you know how many would be punished?" This view of fairness as sameness also appears in their view of punishment. "He should have some kind of punishment. I would make him do some kind of community service or something."

If the fate of President Clinton were in the hands of these students he would remain as president, after they let him know that they disapprove of his behavior and that he let them down as a role model. The issue of the degree to which these views have been shaped by the larger Black community would be an interesting one to study further. We will have to learn more about why and how urban youth sift through their communities' values and decide which to follow and which to ignore. Or even more important, when and under what conditions do they choose to respond to the values they apparently know quite well?